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IN FOCUS

Theories About Flynt Shooting

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'We are not investigating the CIA or the FBI'

LAWRENCEVILLE, Ga. — It's been exactly three months since someone tried to kill Hustler magazine owner Larry C. Flynt, but there still is sharp disagreement between official investigators and the victim and his family about who the prime suspects in the case should be.

Flynt contends that agents of the CIA or FBI shot him in order to interrupt the investigation of President Kennedy's assassination, an investigation financed by his magazine empire.

Bryant Huff, the Gwinnett County, Ga., district attorney heading the investigation of the March 6 shooting of Flynt and his attorney, believes he ultimately will arrest organized crime figures or perhaps disgruntled former employees of Hustler on charges of attempted murder and conspiracy in connection with the noontime attack.

"We are not investigating the CIA or the FBI," Huff says bluntly.

Huff adds that if after arrests are made people want to believe that the gunman was a dupe for a government agency, there simply won't be much he can do to dissuade them.

HE BELIEVES that Lawrenceville, a town of fewer than 10,000 people situated 30 miles northeast of Atlanta, was chosen for the "clever diabolic plot" to murder Flynt because the immediate public reaction would be that some pornography-hating Bible Belt redneck had done the shooting, thereby masking the would-be killer's real motivation.

Police believe the assailant hid under the stone arches of an abandoned hotel on Perry Street here, fired two shots, then escaped in a car driven by a co-conspirator who parked in a back alley that led to the other main road in this red-clay town.

Flynt, partially paralyzed from two bullet wounds and speaking in a weak voice by telephone from his hospital bed in Columbus, Ohio, said yesterday the Gwinnett County prosecutor will never make an arrest in the case because "some agents of the government were involved."

The CIA and FBI, Flynt says, want to prevent publication of the next issue of the Los Angeles Free Press, which he owns and claims will name the real suspects in the Kennedy assassination. Larry Flynt Publications Inc. has offered a $1 million re-

See FLYNT, D-5

ward to anyone who can provide the clues necessary to prove Flynt's contention that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in killing Kennedy.

THE ONLY AREA of agreement between Huff and Gwinnett County police on the one side and Flynt and his relatives — his 24-year-old wife, Althea and his 30-year-old brother, Jimmy — on the other seems to be that he was not shot by a religious fanatic outraged by Flynt's widely publicized emergence last November as a born-again Christian.

Clarence Eugene Reeves Jr., local counsel for Flynt during the trial here of the Hustler owner on obscenity charges that was dismissed after the shooting of the two men, generally agrees on that.

Reeves, who was seriously wounded in the liver and pancreas by a .44 magnum rifle shell that first hit

Flynt, is almost certain that no Georgian or lone fanatic, did the shooting.

"If a religious nut had done it, they only plan a crime up to the point of its commission," Reeves said. "They don't plan a getaway. They want it to be known who did it.

"And local people I'm ruling out because there wasn't that much interest in the (obscenity) case. There wasn't five people other than the media who came into court as spectators. The reason I don't believe anybody local had anything to do with it is that Mr. Flynt made a good impression on the people in this town. I believe he would have been acquitted had the case gone on to the jury."

Huff and Gwinnett County investigators who interviewed Flynt several weeks ago at Ohio State University Medical Center finally convinced him that his earlier charge that a Ku Klux Klan member was involved was not true.

Flynt said he has accepted the district attorney's explanation, which Huff said was based on assurances he received from Klan members he knows that the Klan was not involved. Huff added the Klan has helped provide leads in the investigation.

Huff also said that in the South the days when even Klansmen would get upset about sexually explicit pictures of blacks and whites such as those published in Hustler are over.

Members of Flynt's family still aren't certain about the Klan.

As Jimmy Flynt put it: "You've got to remember how deeply infiltrated the Klan is by the FBI."

WHEN HUFF AND local police talk about possible suspects they focus on organized crime figures and disgruntled former employees of Flynt's empire. They talk about business difficulties at Hustler and "the pornography angle."

Capt. Burt Blanott, head of the Gwinnett County detective squad, is skeptical of the Flynts' fears. "The trail to the Kennedy assassination is so cold that it wouldn't make any difference if there was a $10 million reward."

Chief among the organized crime theories being worked on by Gwinnett County investigators is the possibility that a pornography rival of Flynt's may have tried to have him assassinated.

The investigators have noted three different aspects of the pornography business in their efforts to link it to organized crime and the shooting of Flynt.

• One of Flynt's main suppliers of sexual paraphernalia is Reuben Sturman, a Cleveland businessman currently under indictment. Some federal investigators believe Sturman is connected to organized crime and is perhaps the biggest porno dealer in the country.

(In a series on pornography earlier this year, The Star reported that companies controlled by Sturman had taken over ownership of at least six District bookstores, including one that was extensively remodeled and renamed the Hustler bookstore.)

Persons associated with Sturman are believed by federal investigators to have been involved in violent disputes over territory with other pornography dealers. Gwinnett County investigators are known to be checking whether a potential enemy of Sturman's might have been involved in the shooting of Flynt.

Flynt and his family say they have no connection with organized crime and that their relationship with Sturman has always been friendly, courteous and businesslike.

• Investigators are looking into what connection, if any, there may be between a plot against Flynt and the escape from prison last month of Mike Thevis, a big-time pornography dealer who had headquarters in Atlanta. Thevis and Sturman are believed by federal investigators to have had some territorial disputes.

Flynt and his family say they have never met Thevis but believe he escaped only because he faces a continuing term in federal prison and possible additional serious charges in connection with the alleged murder of one of his associates.

• The recent move of Flynt's Hustler editorial offices to Los Angeles, where his Chic Magazine is already published, his purchase of the formerly sexually oriented Los Angeles Free Press and his announced intention to move his home and entire operation to Los Angeles may have angered California mobsters.

Gwinnett County investigators note that several well known West Coast members of La Cosa Nostra recently were indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of alleged extortion of sex-related businesses.

Gwinnett County investigators say they are "95 percent certain" that there was no involvement in the shooting by the CIA, FBI, Ku Klux Klan, Georgians or political groups, such as FIRE, an underground group of radical women who have sent threatening notes to Flynt, Playboy publisher Hugh Hefner and other skin magazine powers.

"THE TRUTH IS the investigation is concentrating on the actual trigger people," Huff said. "Once the trigger people are determined, then I think the behind-the-scenes people, so to speak, will be most evident."

Huff also makes a point of saying, "We have ruled out all members of Flynt's immediate family as suspects."

The prosecutor declines to elaborate, but mentions the unsuccessful attempt by some of Flynt's closest associates to have him committed to a mental institution last Dec. 23 and have Franklin County Ohio Probate Court Judge Richard B. Metcalf turn over the Hustler empire to Flynt's relatives.

The June issue of Columbus Monthly Magazine first reported the "plot to put Larry Flynt away," but now is scheduling a retraction of its assertion that Flynt's wife was involved. She also says she will file a multi-million dollar libel suit against the magazine.

In his first comment about the attempt to have him committed, Flynt said yesterday that his younger brother, Jimmy, had been persuaded by former Hustler president Jack Gallagher to ask the probate court to commit him to a psychiatric institution for three days of observation.

Under Ohio law, a family member, close friend or business associate can, with a statement from a doctor, seek to have someone committed to an institution.

Flynt said his conversion to Christianity, his announcement at the employees' party last Christmas of $600,000 in raises for the Hustler staff by raising the minimium wage from about $7,000 to $15,000, and his spending $200,000 on advertisements asking people to pray for Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey apparently caused some of his close associates to believe that he was nearing a mental breakdown.

FLYNT'S INCREASING absorption with the CIA, the Kennedy assassination, Dick Gregory, health food and coffee enemas also led some of his friends to conclude that he had lost his grip on reality, sources said.

While vacationing in the Bahamas, Flynt says, he was alerted by his wife of the plan to have him committed and took counter-measures, seeking affidavits from three eminent psychiatrists that certified that he was neither a manic depressive nor otherwise insane as alleged.

"As soon as I found out about it," Flynt said, "it was folded real quick."

Flynt claims that the judge then dropped the warrant which he had issued to Franklin County Ohio sheriffs to apprehend Flynt.

Under Ohio law, Metcalf said in an interview in Columbus, no records of sanity hearings are kept and he will not comment about whether he issued the warrant.

Both Althea Flynt and her brother-in-law resent any suggestion that they are interested in Larry's money and note that they cleared polygraph tests given to them by Gwinnett County detectives.

Huff and police also note that early this year, Flynt fired perhaps 20 percent of the staff of his various companies, including his brother Jimmy, Gallagher and others who apparently failed to accept Flynt's religious conversion.

"Hustler is a one-man show," Flynt said. "Anytime I get people thinking they are me, they have got to go out the door. As far as I am concerned, anyone who works for me is

going to accept my conversion. And it's my company. If I want to spend the money, that's the way it is going to be."

Flynt's wife and brother dismiss any suggestion that the motivation for the attack might have been more closely related to someone interested in taking over, stunting or destroying the Flynt empire, which generated about $30 million last year, according to company officials.

Althea Flynt admits that there were problems late last year between Larry and Jimmy, who rejoined the company only after his brother was shot.

"People couldn't accept Larry's conversion," she says. "Jimmy was concerned that with Larry being converted that he would be susceptible to charity-type things. Jimmy was concerned that Larry may be vulnerable. I don't think Jimmy really sat down and talked enough with people like Dick (Gregory) or Ruth (Carter Stapleton, the president's sister and evangelist.)"

MRS. FLYNT SAYS she wants to believe that the authorities will capture her husband's assailants. But she says she once was one of those people who said "All policemen were pigs" and that she now is "not sure that I can depend on them."

She is worried that the police will fail to get at the real conspirators and will produce "a fall guy," then close the case, a charge that, not unexpectedly, police call preposterous.

The Hustler empire's animosity toward law enforcement officials has been painful to Gwinnett County detectives, who until recent weeks suggested publicly that the Flynt family was deliberately hampering the investigation.

Gwinnett County Police Chief John W. Crunkleton hotly denied any Ku Klux Klan connection with his men. He roundly criticized the Flynts for being able to put up a $1 million reward for solving the Kennedy assassination and being unwilling to offer any bonus to people able to provide information about the Flynt shooting.

Then, on May 21, in a full-page ad in The Gwinnett Daily News, Althea Flynt offered a $100,000 reward for information leading to convictions in the case. The local police will determine what information is deserves the reward.

Two days later, Huff and two detectives had their first interview with Flynt about the shooting. During the 2½-hour, two-part meeting with Flynt between his physical therapy sessions, Huff says investigators received complete and candid cooperation from the Hustler publisher.

HUFF ADDS, "Flynt does not have any idea on who shot him or the reasons he was shot. . . . We gave him a world of food for thought. We evoked in him thought processes."

And, the district attorney claims, the spat between the Flynt organization and law enforcement authorities has been completely patched up, especially since Flynt seemed to have "an open mind" about modifying his theories that the CIA or FBI tried to do him in.

Police are convinced they will crack the case and are equally certain that the culprit will be found not to be related to any of the factions the Flynt family suspect may have been behind the shooting.

Huff is confident that the case will be solved. "Remember we had witnesses. You know we have physical evidence we gathered at the scene of the crime. We have other witnesses we've interviewed. We have the evidence to secure a conviction once the suspect is apprehended."

After interviewing Flynt, Huff said, "I say to whoever did this, 'Enjoy yourself while you can because we are knocking on your door.' "

So far, police continue to seek for questioning a man in his early 30s, about six feet tall, with blond hair and a mustache, who was seen with a gun in his belt in front of the abandoned hotel about 20 minutes before Flynt was shot.

That man, investigators believe, may be connected with the pornography business and may have come from Ohio to "stalk" Flynt.

Back in Columbus, at Dodd Hall on the Ohio State campus, Flynt continues his fight to learn to walk again. He is paralyzed from the mid-thighs down and doctors give him a 50-50 chance of regaining his mobility.

Off-duty Columbus police guards stand outside Flynt's room for $8.50 an hour. They are there constantly now, because the Flynts fear of another assassination attempt.

Jimmy Flynt, still skeptical about his brother's conversion to Christianity, sums up the need for security at the hospital and the Hustler offices.

"God was with Larry down there in Georgia," Jimmy says, "but he wasn't working as a security guard that day."

—United Press International

Larry Flynt insists, from his hospital bed, that the government was somehow involved in his being wounded last March in Lawrenceville, Ga.